

Florida Cracker Culture: Its Origins and Development

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ABSTRAKT

Během druhé poloviny 18. století se začaly na jihovýchodu Severní Ameriky objevovat zmínky o takzvaných Crackerech. Později byli označováni za kovboje z Floridy. Tato práce se zabývá původem jejich specifické kultury a také bližším popisem jejich tradičních způsobů a zvyků. Dále také zaznamenává vývoj této kultury a snaží se nastínit její vliv na historii Floridy a její roli v občanské válce Spojených států amerických, jakožto i její roli během poválečné rekonstrukce. Konkrétně se tato práce soustředí na kulturu Crackerů do 20. století, kdy může být řečeno, že tato kultura dozrála.

Klíčová slova: Kultura Crackerů, Keltský, Spojené Státy, Jih, Florida, Občanská válka, Rekonstrukce, dobytek

ABSTRACT

During the second half of the eighteenth century, mentionings of so-called Crackers started to emerge in the southeastern part of North America. Later, they came to be referred to as Florida cowboys. This thesis deals with origins of their specific culture and also provides a description of their traditional ways and habits. Furthermore it charts the development of this culture and tries to outline its influence on Florida history and its role in the United States Civil War as well as its role during the post-war reconstruction. Especially this thesis focuses on Cracker culture before the turn of the twentieth century, when the culture might be said to have reached maturity.

Keywords: Cracker Culture, Celtic, United States, South, Florida, Civil War, Reconstruction, cattle

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INTRODUCTION

“Who or what, these ‘crackers’ are, from whom descended, of what nationality, or what become of them, is one among the many unsolved mysteries in this State,”¹ said George M. Barbour, a New Englander who visited Florida in 1882.. At that time, it was hard to clearly define who Crackers were, and where they actually came from. These days, however, it is a little bit clearer.

This thesis focuses on the origins of this specific culture in Florida and on its development. The origins of the Cracker culture are still not definite, and for some observers it still remains in contention. Historian Grady McWhiney is considered a leading authority on Cracker culture, and therefore the first part of this thesis is based on his observations.

A struggle this culture had to deal with was constant criticism of their specific ways. The vast majority of observers, usually from the North, considered Crackers to be something bad. This thesis notes that these observers were usually biased and not correct, and that they simply failed to understand the real Cracker nature. What most of these observers usually did not mention is the contribution of Crackers not only to Florida, but to the United States during the Civil War and even during the post-war reconstruction.

The twentieth century brought great changes, even for Crackers. Their typical ways started to shift. Therefore this thesis is focused on Cracker Culture development from its beginnings until the twentieth century.

¹ Dana Ste. Claire, *Cracker: The Cracker Culture in Florida History* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006), 61.

1 ORIGINS OF CRACKER CULTURE

Many stereotypes about Crackers exist. Most are derogatory. Few of them accurately describe Crackers' true nature. This chapter deals with different views on Crackers and their culture, its origins and its adaptation to new environments like Florida.

1.1 Origins and definition of the word Cracker

The origin of the word Cracker is questionable. It first appeared in the beginnings of the sixteenth century in England, and it was a word for a fast talker. Even William Shakespeare used this word in *King John*, writing “What cracker is the same that deafes our eares with this abundance of superfluous breath?” Many hypotheses exist why this name was used in connection with Florida inhabitants. In Florida it was first mentioned in 1767 in reference to Crackertown. In 1790 it referred to migrants. One of the most common hypotheses is that the word Cracker emerged from the sound of cracking a whip. Crackers are well known for herding livestock, especially hogs and cattle, and using whips to do so. Historian Dana Ste. Claire hypothesizes that the moniker Cracker was given to them because of the sound they made when beating dried corn with a stone. Ste. Claire further postulated that “the term may have been derived from the Spanish word *cuáquero*, meaning a Quaker, referencing Quakers [who] earlier settled in Florida.” There are many other theories of how the name originated, but none of them are proven, leading Ste. Claire to concisely conclude that “a Cracker is a Cracker.”²

Such theories aside, definitions exist. For instance the *Oxford Universal Dictionary on Historical Principles* says that a Cracker is “A braggart, liar (1681). One full conversation (Scottish). A lie (1625). A name for the “poor whites” in the southern United States (1767).”³ The *Urban Dictionary* states that “Cracker – Originally the white slave driver,” now is used by American blacks to reference all southern whites.⁴

Primary source documents also offer descriptions, often derogatory. One source called Crackers “the people of Florida [who] are an ignorant set devoid of hospitality, and very penurious.” Another source identified them as “soft voiced, easy-going, childlike, kind of

² Ste. Claire, *Cracker*, 235; 28-37.

³ Grady McWhiney, *Cracker Culture: Celtic Ways in the Old South* (Tucaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1988), vii.

⁴ “Cracker,” UrbanDictionary.com, 2014. <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=cracker>.

folk, quick to anger.”⁵ Generally, most sources identified them as barbarous, lazy illiterates. Although some scholars view “Cracker Culture” as a “sub-type within the larger regional culture denoted as “Southern,” author Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings describes Cracker culture as pertaining specifically to Florida.⁶

1.2 Origins of Cracker Culture

Crackers were not the original inhabitants of Florida. Those were, among many others, the Calusa, Timucua or Apalachee Indians. The European discovery of Florida occurred when Ponce de Leon landed there in 1513. Florida remained a Spanish colony until 1763, when the British took control of Florida after the French and Indian War. The British defeat in the American Revolutionary War caused Florida to revert to Spanish rule until 1821, when Spain sold Florida to the United States. The British colonization of North America, and the short-lived British era in Florida, led to what McWhiney has deemed a “significant migration from Scotland, Ireland, and Wales to the American South . . . before 1800.”⁷ Among those migrants were Crackers.

1.2.1 Celtic origins of Cracker Culture

According to Grady McWhiney it is a common mistake to think that the Crackers are of Anglo-Saxon origin. In his opinion, they were Celts of Welsh, Irish and Scottish origins. However, he admits that “little islands of English culture persisted” in the South.⁸

Still these “islands” were rare. For Englishmen, the South was wild and barbaric. On the other hand, for Celts the South was a perfect place to immigrate. The vast majority of the land there was still unsettled, which was suitable for them and their habits. McWhiney says the South “was ideally suited for the clannish, herding, leisure-loving Celts.”⁹ It was also one of the reasons why Celts decided to leave their homes. It was a great opportunity for them. Even in the “Old World,” in northern Britain, one of their pastimes was cattle-raising. Unfortunately, in Britain the conditions for cattle-raising worsened. John Ross, for

⁵ James N. Denham, “The Florida Cracker,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 72, no. 4 (1994), 461 - 462.

⁶ Mozell C. Hill and Bevode C. McCall, “Cracker Culture: A Preliminary Definition,” *Phylon* 11, no 3 (1950), 223-25.

⁷ Bonnie G. McEwan, “The Spiritual Conquest of La Florida,” *American Anthropologist* 103, no. 3 (2001), 633-44; Louis J. Mendelis, “Colonial Florida,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 3, no. 2 (1924). 4-15; McWhiney, *Cracker Culture*, 38.

⁸ McWhiney, *Cracker Culture*, 2, 18.

⁹ McWhiney, *Cracker Culture*, 8.

example, stated that he went “to Carolina because the rent of his Possession was greatly advanced, [and] the price of Cattle which must pay that Rent reduced more than one half.”¹⁰

McWhiney's comparison of Celts and Southerners is significant in proving that Cracker origins are Celtic. He discovered many similarities among them, e.g., their leisurely ways. Crackers as well as Celts, in comparison to Northerners and Englishmen, could be considered lazy. They enjoyed their free time, and work was not so significant for them. Charles G. Parsons noted that “the slave States are proverbial for their amusements.” On the other hand, the northerners were the very opposite. According to Frederic Law Olmstead “the people of the Northern States, as a whole, probably enjoy life less than any other civilized people.” To compare this with Crackers origins, one Englishman said about Celts that “the enthusiasm of Scotch dancers is proverbial.”¹¹ Besides a cultural comparison, McWhiney analyzed the names of Southerners and determined that Celtic origins in the South prevail.

Even though Crackers were settling Florida already during the Spanish and British periods, the vast majority of Crackers started to flow into Florida after its annexation by the United States. However, it was not usually from Europe anymore. Crackers, originally from northern Britain, then inhabitants of Southern states like Alabama or Georgia, started to migrate southward. One of the reasons may be still a lot of unsettled land and also easy terms on which it was offered by Congress.¹² Another reason for Crackers to migrate to Florida was probably the fact, that in these states the plantation system continued to spread. The places where their herds could feed themselves were waning, and unsettled plains in Florida were great opportunity for them.¹³ So this begun denser settling of Florida, and Crackers played important role in it. English Origins of Cracker Culture

Although traces of English culture could be found in the South, it was uncommon. For Englishmen, the South was barbarous, and it reminded them of Scotland, Wales, and Ireland. They preferred, if they decided to leave England, to immigrate to the North as it

¹⁰ Ibid., 10.

¹¹ Charles G. Parsons, *Inside View of Slavery: or, a Tour Among the Planters*, (Cleveland, 1855), 135; McWhiney, *Cracker Culture*, 105-115.

¹² Ste. Claire, *Cracker*, 49.

¹³ See: Mart A. Stewart, *What Nature Suffers to Groe: Life, Labor, and Landscape on the Georgia Coast, 1680-1920*, (Georgia, 2002).

was more prosperous and cultivated, and more like England. Some Englishmen settled in the South, but they were either Celticized or they did not assimilate with Celts and Crackers.

The difference between Englishmen and Celts, which was present even in the Old World, was significant. Celts in the eyes of Englishmen were “slothful,” “the most improvident people in the whole world,” “lazy to an excess,” and “indolent.”¹⁴ Northerners held the same opinion about Crackers in the South. On the other hand, Celts were not fond of Englishmen either. Mary B. Chestnut, southern author, noted that “British is the most conceited nation in the world, the most self-sufficient, self-satisfied, and arrogant.”¹⁵ Northerners simply did not have sympathy for Southerners, especially Crackers, and on the other hand, the Crackers did not have sympathy for them either.

1.2.2 German origins of Cracker Culture

Other settlers in the South were Germans. Although they settled there, they were nothing like Celts or Crackers. McWhiney says that “the people who successfully resisted Celticization” were Germans. They simply did not share Celts' love of leisure, conversely they were known as “industrious farmers,” who were practically destroying the earth, which generally differed from nature-loving Celts. Cracker, however also cut a few trees down, but in order to build their log house, not to use the land to do the business. Again, this was common also in Britain. Germans who lived in Celtic Britain were good in resisting Celticization. One Englishman noted that “they are different from the Irish in several particulars...They are very industrious...better fed, clothed, and lodged.”¹⁶

1.2.3 Indian and black origins of Cracker Culture

Indians, as the original inhabitants of Florida, came into contact with Crackers quite often. This caused most southern Indians to become fond of the Crackers' lifestyle and customs, and they even started practicing it. According to Ste. Claire, they became “crackerized.”¹⁷ Even Florida blacks began practicing Crackers' way of living.

¹⁴ McWhiney, *Cracker Culture*, 42.

¹⁵ Mary B. Chesnut, *A Diary from Dixie: Electronic Edition*, (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1997), 76.

¹⁶ McWhiney, *Cracker Culture*, 19 - 20.

¹⁷ McWhiney, *Cracker Culture*, 21; Ste. Claire, *Cracker*, 65.

Some observers noted that Indians shared Crackers' love of leisure, whiskey, periodical migrations, and hunting. Furthermore, an eighteenth-century governor of Spanish Florida, Manuel de Zespedes, noted that the reason Indians and Crackers had some kind of bond between them was their loyalty to Great Britain during the American Revolution. After their defeat, they "were forced to take refuge in this Florida and with the Creeks." Regarding blacks, they also adapted to Cracker lifestyle, but their reason was quite different. According to John Dederer, those two cultures were similar and "it took little adaptation for slaves to fit Celtic characteristics around their African practices."¹⁸

On the other hand, Comte de Castelnau, British traveler and diplomat, was of a different opinion. He noted that Crackers "adopted the habits of savages," which indicates that Crackers were not the ones who influenced the, but rather the ones who were influenced. However, he probably was not familiar with the theory that Crackers were of Celtic origin. If he had been, he would probably agree that the wilderness was already natural for Celts, and so that Crackers were not influenced by Indians. Thus, Indians and blacks can not be considered as the originators of Cracker culture. This honor belongs to the Celts.

¹⁸ Ste. Claire, *Cracker*, 64-65.

2 CRACKER CULTURE DURING THE ANTEBELLUM PERIOD

Celts brought with them to the new world their specific culture, customs and traditions, which were so distinct from the English ones. One Englishmen noted about Scots “their customs how different from ours.”¹⁹ This persisted also in New World.

2.1 Style of living

Many non-crackers and mainly Northerners were outraged by the Cracker's style of living. In general it can be said that Cracker's lifestyle was relaxed, not lazy as many observers do not understand. They did not care about how rich they are or they are not. Still they were considered as the poor whites of the south just because of their lifestyle. Vast majority of people did not take into consideration that their wealth did not lie in the money saved, but in different things, which were more important for them.

2.1.1 Housing

It was not common for vast majority of antebellum Crackers to build big, spectacular houses. In their nature was migration. What many of them did was that they settled somewhere, built a cabin – a log-house – and cultivated a piece of land. According to Achille Murat, Frenchmen who settled in middle Florida, when the area they settled in became peopled, they sold the farm, and moved to another uncultivated place to repeat this whole process again. Their migration manners are described by Dana Ste. Claire who says that “early on, Cracker migrants spent a great deal of time travelling from one place to another, rarely settling down.” According to James M. Denham this mobility was one of the most significant features of early Crackers.²⁰

To make this often traveling possible, Crackers needed some vehicle, where they could load things they considered important. These vehicles were in vast majority of cases covered wagons or homemade carts. They usually harnessed oxes or mulas to drag the wagon. Only when they found abandoned place which they liked, they settled down for a while.

¹⁹ McWhiney, *Cracker Culture*, 23.

²⁰ McWhiney, *Cracker Culture*, 12; Achille Murat, *The United States of North America*, (London, 1833), 52; Ste. Claire, *Cracker*, 77; Denham, “The Florida Cracker,” *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 72, 453-468.

The Cracker cabin or the log-house they build was simple abode. There was no reason for them to build large houses when they moved from place to place very often. To gain a general overview, here is description of cracker's log-house from Frederick Law Olmsted:

“There were several windows, some of which were boarded over, some had wooden shutters, and some were entirely open. There was not a pane of glass. The doors were closed with difficulty. We could see the stars, as we lay in bed, through the openings of the roof; and on all sides, in the walls of the room, one's arm might be thrust out.”²¹

This was for Northerners description of poverty. Olmsted noted that the Southern house “was more comfortless than nine-tenths of the stables of the North,” but the truth is that most of the Crackers owned many acres of land, and if not land, they still owned large herds of livestock.²² So the term poverty used in connection with Crackers is often misused.

2.1.2 Eating habits

As style of housing, also Cracker's eating habits were atypical. Although Crackers were sometimes considered hospitable, a lot of visitor complained about their food. Their diet was simple, “designed for tough backwood stomach.” It was the corn, pork and sour milk what was Cracker's diet mostly made from. McWhiney lists also wild game, beef, chicken, sweet potatoes, field peas, rice and greens replaced or supplemented their diet.²³ In other words anything they could get easily from the nature or from their livestock.

Besides this at least a little bit typical food, in the early times Crackers had different, and in eyes of visitors very unusual food. These were usually animals native to Florida, as gopher tortoise. But this was not the most special part of their diet. What Ste. Claire describes as the most peculiar is possum. Other items on their menu were for instance squirrels, armadillos and in case of coastal Crackers, lot of seafood. What was considered as the most delicate meal was rattlesnake. However, the early Crackers probably followed the saying that “if it walked, and didn't talk, we ate it.”²⁴

²¹ McWhiney, *Cracker Culture*, 75.

²² McWhiney, *Cracker Culture*, 75Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 81.

²⁴ Ste. Claire, *Cracker*, 135-149.

If Crackers gathered more than they were able to eat, they had their own special method of preserving the meat. They usually had a big barrel in front of their cabin, where they were keeping all their meat for later. The meat in the barrel was cured in salt and therefore it lasted longer.²⁵ Other thing that Crackers enjoyed was cooking outside. Margaret Deland described this process, she noted that “near the cabin, a fire is built between three great stones, which serve as tripod for their kettles, and a thin twist of blue smoke as straight as a staff raises into the still air.”²⁶

Crackers also did not care about dining ethic. When they were eating they often did not use fork and spoon, just their hands, which was more natural way of eating for them. About hand washing there was usually no mention and serving meal in courses meant nothing to them, too.²⁷

One other thing often revolted visitors in South. Cracker’s every day life was often accompanied by drinking of whiskey. One traveler noted that the whiskey was “the region’s favorite beverage.” Moonshining, as they called production of whiskey, was according to Ste. Claire “one of the most lucrative enterprises of rural Cracker.”²⁸ Although McWhiney stated that the amount of whiskey Crackers made was the same as they bought, it is certain that moonshining has its important part in Cracker culture.

2.1.3 Leisure and Cracker’s amusements

The word leisure is one of the most characteristic features of Crackers. They enjoyed spending their free time by doing something what pleased them rather than working. One southerner noted that “Our poor white men will not... work if they can very well help it.” They worked just as much to secure enough food and other necessities of life. This was usually incorrectly considered as laziness by people, who did not understand Cracker’s love of “personal independence and restrain-free life.” According to McWhiney somebody had to work, and in his opinion Cracker’s animals, women and slaves actually worked.²⁹

But even if Crackers had slaves and women and practiced open-range herding, it is not surprising that this work was not in eyes of Northerners proper and the outcomes were not

²⁵ Ste. Claire, *Cracker*, 86.

²⁶ Margaret Deland, *Florida Days*, (Boston: Longmans, Green & Company, 1889), 181.

²⁷ McWhiney, *Cracker Culture*, 82.

²⁸ McWhiney, *Cracker Culture*, 90; Ste. Claire, *Cracker*, 150.

²⁹ McWhiney, *Cracker Culture*, 45, 41.

as large as they could have been. They stated it was because the women and slaves were unskilled workers, but it may have another reason. As slaves were blacks, many people took the view that they were as lazy as their masters.³⁰

What was far more important for Crackers was enjoying pleasures. What they considered as pleasures seemed in eyes of non-crackers (Northerners mainly) as evil. For instance one visitor noted “a most sinful feast again!” One activity Crackers considered as amusement was besides others talking. Love of talking was already in Celtic nature, so it is one of thing they brought with them. A traveler noted that Cracker showed “a love, amounting almost to a passion, for discussion, oratory, and public speaking.” Besides talking, McWhiney stated that Crackers “enjoyed seeing and being seen as well as hearing as being heard,”³¹ Therefore their devotion to theatre is straightforward.

In connection with this their weakness for dance should be mentioned. One visitor from England noted “dancing is the universal amusement.” On the other hand, Ste. Claire suggested that this dances did not happen so often, but once they happened, large amount of Crackers arrived. What was according to Ste. Claire more common for Florida Crackers was organization of gatherings, for instance perleu. Ste. Claire describes it as “day-long outdoor feast” accompanied by “all-day sings and contests.” Perleu was not the only gathering common for Crackers. The other ones like Florida Frolic or a Cane Grind were also all-day gathering, if not several-day gathering.³² Whether Crackers enjoyed rather gatherings to dancing or the other way around is not sure. However, they were very sociable people.

But not every pleasure Crackers indulged in was so innocent. Crackers often satisfied themselves by amusements, which were in eyes of many non-crackers violent, maybe also because that this likes were usually accompanied by drinking of whiskey and chewing tobacco. The truth is that Crackers did not have to go far for a hassle. One wanderer noted “The darkest side of the Southerners is his quarrelsomeness, and recklessness of human life.” To picture this, description of one man of what he witnessed follows:

“The arrangement was that each [antagonist] should be armed with a double barreled gun loaded with buck shot, with a pair of pistols & a bowie knife. At the

³⁰ McWhiney, *Cracker Culture*, 45.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 105, 112, 110.

³² McWhiney, *Cracker Culture*, 117; Ste. Claire, *Cracker*, 94-100.

word they were to advance towards each other and fire at such time as they pleased. If the guns failed to kill they were to use the pistols & then finish with bowie knives & fight until one or the other was killed. They fought until both were very badly mutilated and then the seconds separated them.”³³

Castelnau also noted that if something similar happened, Crackers often made loud noises like crowing till the place where he stands is full of audience.³⁴

When Crackers did not distort each other, they enjoyed watching or doing bloody sports. Good example would be cock-fighting, or bear baiting. What they loved even more was hunting. Crackers were great horse racers and also had a few dogs with them on hunt. How they appreciate the dogs proves old southern expression “Drink my whiskey, steal my wife, but don't mess with my dog.”³⁵

Another not so innocent amusement of Crackers was stealing. However, common was only stealing of livestock. According to McWhiney it was “long and honored Celtic tradition.” According to him Crackers – the cattle-raisers – did not mind if someone stole them several head of cattle, but if the amount overstepped some borderline, they would take care of it. On the other hand, in connection with their migratory manners, when they settled somewhere, they did not care if the place has an owner. If some owner appeared, he usually “does not receive more response than a bullet from a rifle,” as noted Castelnau.³⁶

2.1.4 Religion

State conclusively which church Crackers kept is very hard. Some observers even stated that they kept none. From their Celtic origins it is likely that they were mainly Presbyterians, Baptists and Methodists. Clark I. Cross suggested that Crackers were influenced by Protestants, and also trace of Episcopalians could be also found in the Florida However there were usually small numbers of them and the three firstly mentioned churches universally dominated.³⁷

Crackers seemed in eyes of many travelers irreligious. They were scandalized by Cracker's lack of respect to religion. They did not realize that Crackers considered different

³³ McWhiney, *Cracker Culture*, 148-149.

³⁴ Comte de Castelnau, “Essay on Middle Florida, 1837-1838,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 26 (1948), 238-239.

³⁵ McWhiney, *Cracker Culture*, 140.

³⁶ McWhiney, *Cracker Culture*, 165; Castelnau, *Essay on Middle Florida*, 238.

³⁷ Ste. Claire, *Cracker*, 88; McWhiney, *Cracker Culture*, 188.

thing to be religious than them. For instance Sabbath in eyes of New Englanders was day of resting. It was not allowed to work or dance or hunt. There was a long list of forbidden activities. Crackers understand Sabbath differently, as resting meant among other thing having fun for them. They usually spent this day by doing things which pleased them. Drinking whiskey was not an exception. One source noted “there is no Sabbath..., they work, run, swear and drink here, on Sunday just as they do on any other day of the week.”³⁸

The second reason why a lot of Northerners did not agree with Crackers religious practices was probably their disinterest in visiting church during the Sabbath. This is connected with their different views. They proffered to give tribute to God by their own way, not by following rules. What offended Northerners maybe even more than Crackers frequent absence in church was probably their behavior if they entered the church. They usually took their dogs with them, chewing of tobacco and drinking of whiskey often accompanied their visit in church, and talking during the sermon was ever-present. Another thing that was common were late arrivals even during the service. This, of course, many of Northerners did not like and did not understand, but McWhiney fittingly noted that “southern religious practices made good sense to Southerners and mirrored their beliefs and leisurely ways.”³⁹

In contrast with religion, Crackers were superstitious. This in eyes of some travelers seemed as a sign of their simple-mindedness, but it had nothing to do with this. It was one of their traditions they took from their Celtic ancestors. The list of the superstitions they believed in is long, but some of them are for instance that “clothes should be washed on Monday; it was bad luck to walk under a ladder or to break a mirror” and on the other hand that eating of hog jowls and black-eyed peas on New Year’s Eve will bring them good luck.⁴⁰

2.1.5 Education

To say that Crackers were not interested in education would not be accurate, although most of observers thought so. Of course that they admitted that not all of them were uneducated, but it is true that only a few of early Crackers could write and read. According

³⁸ McWhiney, *Cracker Culture*, 179-181.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 189-192.

⁴⁰ McWhiney, *Cracker Culture*, 207; Ste. Claire, *Cracker*, 88.

to one source, to be able to write and read was sign of dishonest Northerners. After one Northerner tricked him in the purchase agreement, he stated “do you suppose I am fool enough, since that, there is any benefit in learning to write?”⁴¹

According to Frank Owsley, school attendance rate in South was much higher than in north. He stated that in South one out of every 247 attended the college. In North it was only one out of every 703. However, schools in the South in general were usually not of a good quality, at least in comparison to those of North. There was lack of books, as only few Crackers were interested in collecting them, and the schools looked not much better than Crackers’ log-houses.⁴²

Sometimes, more educated Crackers sent their children to North for better education. According to McWhiney they sent their children to North also due to protect them “from their cultural tradition,” as they considered the South corrupted. On the other hand, vast majority of Southerners refused sending their children to Northern schools. They were afraid of them becoming “Yankeefied”, which happened often, when young Crackers came back from school. Teachers tried hard to change their opinions. This did not avoid even to slavery, and so in later antebellum period often happened that they came back home “tainted with Abolitionism,” and when it became to war, many Southerners joined Union Army. Unfortunately according to McWhiney they realized this threat too late.⁴³

Reading, as well as writing, was not very popular among the Crackers. When traveler asked a Cracker if he likes to read, he replied “no, it’s damned tiresome.” On the other hand, they usually did not need it in their lifestyle and it definitely did not mean they were not smart. One source admitted that Crackers are “ignorant, so far as book-learning is concerned, but they are well supplied by common sense.”⁴⁴

What Crackers usually preferred to reading and writing was talking. They were more interested in hearing or telling a story than reading or writing it. Further, they did not need books for learning what was beneficial for their style of life, they simply taught it from their ancestor’s experiences.⁴⁵ And it seems it was enough, because they were usually successful what they engaged in.

⁴¹ Parsons, *Inside View of Slavery: or, a Tour Among the Planters*, 245.

⁴² McWhiney, *Cracker Culture*, 198

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 199-201.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 206-210.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 216.

2.2 Agricultural ways of Crackers

2.2.1 Farming

It took some time till Crackers developed their farming skills. Early Crackers were forced to eat everything they found in nature or were able to get another way. Typical food of early Crackers was grits, greens and gravy. But even after developing their farming skills, farming was not made on the level. Farming was not for Crackers as substantial as herding. They grew only as much as they needed, and usually they did not care much about their fields. According to McWhiney “most Southerners were careless farmers.” They just let the plants grow, and then they harvested it and usually just waited what will grow again next time in the same place.⁴⁶ They even organized their land, if they had any, and their house so as to simplify the workflow. According to one Northerner some Cracker “did all his planting on the side of a hill so that when his pumpkins are ripe...all he had to do is to start them and they roll right down into his kitchen.”⁴⁷ Laissez-fair plant growing was another sign of Crackers’ love of leisure.

Corn was slight exception, because it created the main part of their meal. As mentioned above, grits were typical for them in their early times. Ste. Claire noted that „Grits are ground for dried corn,” which implies that maize cultivation was crucial for Crackers. However, only some of the Crackers could afford to buy grits in store every time it was needed. Vast majority of them the growing of the maize on their own was the cheaper way. The process of growing corn was simple. Crackers bought seeds and planted them (most often they used dry corn seeds they grew on their own). Then they sorted it into good corn and bad corn. Bad corn was usually used to feed hogs and the rest was left in the field to be dried and then they usually cracked the corn with the stone or used for instance pestle. Corn was not only ever-present part of Cracker diet, they used it also, as mentioned above, to make whiskey. Regarding the other crops, what especially surprised non-southerners was the absence of wheat. Crackers were not fond of wheat, even their bread was made from corn.⁴⁸ Other crops they grew were for example peas, sweet potatoes or rice.

⁴⁶ McWhiney, *Cracker Culture*, 74-76.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 86.

There are several reasons why most of the Crackers were not interested in farming. One of them is that the land in Florida was mostly woods and sandy soil. To cultivate the fields was probably strenuous work. McWhiney says that “the Old South...was not one big plantation; it was, for the most part, a vast wilderness.” Less than 10 percent of the land in the South was cultivated, especially in Florida it was even only around 1 percent.⁴⁹ This fact is connected with the next reason. The land in Florida was simply more suitable for herding.

However, there were places, where the soil was more fertile. These places served for growing of cotton mainly, which, after Florida’s annexation to United States, became one of the most cultivated crops in the South. But as Mozzel and Hill aptly noted “‘Cracker Culture’ might be contrasted with the ‘Plantation South’.” To picture the difference between farming and herding, McWhiney stated that in South “some people planted few or no crops at all; some owned no land, but almost every white family owned livestock.”⁵⁰

2.2.2 Herding

Herding practices are significant part of Florida history since its beginnings. According to Joe A. Akerman, Jr. the first cattle emerged in Florida altogether with Ponce de León and his second expedition to Florida in 1521. However, this first supply of cattle to Florida was unsuccessful, as Indians attacked it. What happened with the livestock is not known. Later another Spaniards brought horses, swine and cattle but due to constant Indian attacks Florida faced the lack of beef for a long time. However, as time went, the supplies of cattle from Spain continued. By 1650s first ranchos were established in Florida, and soon the smuggling cattle to Cuba started. In the course of the time the cattle trade with West Indies, especially Cuba became very remunerative business.⁵¹

Although the cattle-raising was present in Florida already for some time, according to Ste. Claire “it was during the second quarter of the 1800s...when raising cattle...became attractive and widespread.”⁵² Furthermore Akerman Jr. argues that when Florida became US territory, it experienced influx of frontiersmen who were eager to have a piece of local

⁴⁹ McWhiney, *Cracker Culture*, 62.

⁵⁰ Hill and McCall, “*Cracker Culture*”, 226; McWhiney, *Cracker Culture*, 64.

⁵¹ Joe A. Akerman, Jr., *Florida Cowman, a History of Florida Cattle Raising*, (Florida: Florida Cattlemen’s association, 1976): 1-5.

⁵² Ste. Claire, *Cracker*, 173-174.

land, in case of rangers especially rangeland.⁵³ Crackers were not the exception, cattle rising lured them. They were skillful cattlemen as they brought this heritage with them from the Old World.

The cattle, which were the most raised in Florida, were Andalusian cattle, according to Ste. Claire it were descendants of cattle which Spaniards and Brits brought to Florida during their domination. This type of cattle perfectly fitted to the rough conditions in Florida. It was able to endure the heat, insect, and lack of food. But not only cattle were of Andalusian origin. Besides this, Crackers needed durable horses, when they were droving their cattle on long distances. Andalusian ponies with this feature were perfect choice for these occasions.⁵⁴

Although like everything in Crackers' lifestyle, even cattle-raising was made in their own specific way. It was not only settling somewhere without caring about the owner of the land. What Crackers practiced was open-range herding. Woods and wild nature in the Florida were suitable place for Crackers who did not care about the fences. They left their cattle and hogs graze themselves, what saved Crackers' the trouble. Actually most of the Crackers did not understand "why anyone would work, when livestock could make a living for them."⁵⁵

Crackers raised the livestock for two main reasons. One of them was of course for food. Pork and beef was altogether with corn and sweet potatoes main part of their diet. When they killed hog or a cow, they, as mentioned above, usually salted the meat in brain, put it into barrel and left it outside their house. Travelers often complained about lack of fresh meat, milk or cheese. They were surprised by the fact that Crackers did not use their cattle to produce milk, and in connection to it butter and cheese.⁵⁶ In case of later antebellum Crackers, the next reason was trade. Cattle trade had a great influence on Florida economy, and for Crackers it was one means of subsistence. McWhiney noted that "throughout the antebellum period Southerners drove enormous herds of livestock over long distances to market."⁵⁷

⁵³ Akerman, Jr., *Florida Cowman*, 37-38.

⁵⁴ Ste.Claire, *Cracker*, 174.

⁵⁵ McWhiney, *Cracker Culture*, 51-79.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 80-104.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 51-79.

What was one of the most important things for Crackers when they were droving the cattle on long distances was a whip, usually made from tanned buckskin. As mentioned above, they used it really often, and so they probably get their moniker. When they drove the cattle, they usually only cracked with it in the air, not touching the cow, able to stop whole herd only by the sound. However, they did not use it only when driving the cattle. Besides this, they used it also to communicate among themselves. Ste. Claire noted that “the stockmen sometimes used whip-cracking codes to communicate messages to each other across the lonely range.”⁵⁸

Even though Crackers tried to live without worries, there was one problem they had to face. It was called cattle rustling. According to Akerman in Florida this bad habit broke out in late 1800s. Indians, mentioned above, were not the only one cattle thieves, also whitemen used to steal the cattle. The opinions about how Crackers treated the thieves are different. McWhiney stated that if the amount of stolen cattle was not significant, the owner did not care, he even expected it. On the other hand, most of other authors argued that if anyone stole Cracker’s cattle, he usually ended badly. Achille Murat stated that “according to their morality, cowstealing is the greatest crime.”⁵⁹ One of the last cowboys in Florida stated in work of Frederic Remington that if anyone stole cattle „he mustn’t get caught; that’s all. They all do it, but they never bring their troubles into court. They just shoot it out there in the bresh.”⁶⁰ Apparently, he does not mention any amount of heads of cattle which is allowed to be stolen. What McWhiney probably meant by the „certain amount“ is that Crackers who were practicing open-range herding, could hardly keep an eye on every single head of their herd. If someone stole only a few cows from some Cracker’s large herd, they probably did not even notice. This point of view had also Joe Akerman, Jr. who stated that “it was a part of unwritten code...that the Cracker cattlemen with sizeable herds expected a certain amount of cattle stealing.”⁶¹ However, some of them were less tolerant. The fact that Crackers dealt with thieves on their own is true. Courts in the South were not interfering into their personal affairs. If somebody stole cattle of some

⁵⁸ Ste. Claire, *Cracker*, 177.

⁵⁹ Achille Murat, *United States of North America*, 54.

⁶⁰ McWhiney, *Cracker*, 165; Frederic Remington, „Cracker Cowboys of Florida“, *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* (1985), 341.

⁶¹ Akerman, Jr., *Florida Cowman*, 210.

Cracker, and he took care about it himself, he usually was not arrested,⁶² as it was considered as self-defense.

Speaking of later antebellum Crackers, one of the best known is Jacob Summerlin, so called King of the Crackers. His family is one of the first families who came to Florida after it became U.S. territory and he is the perfect example of cattle raiser from Florida. He fought in the Second Seminole War against Indians, but after its end he found himself more interested in cattle-raising, due to what he is also popular.⁶³ The first cattle Jake bought in 1845, specifically he ordered fifty heads.⁶⁴ Nine years later he multiplied this amount to more than 2000 heads, and by the beginning of the Civil War in 1861, Summerlin's herd counted more than 20 000 heads, which made him one of the largest livestock raiser in the United States.⁶⁵

But he was not the only one. Cattle raising due to its importance rapidly developed in antebellum era. U.S. Census reports show that in ten years period from 1840 to 1850 the amount of cattle doubled from 118 081 to 261 085 heads. In next ten years, right before the Civil War, the amount of cattle reached 388 060 heads.⁶⁶ With this amount of cattle, Florida together with Crackers cattle raisers played very important role in forthcoming Civil War.

⁶² McWhiney, *Cracker Culture*, 163.

⁶³ Akerman, Jr., *Florida Cowman*, 40.

⁶⁴ Joe A. Akerman, Jr. And J. Mark Akerman, *Jacob Summerlin: King of the Crackers*, (Florida Historical Society Press, 2004), 33.

⁶⁵ Akerman Jr. and Akerman, *Jacob Summerlin*, 43-51.

⁶⁶ Akerman, Jr., *Florida Cowman*, 83.

3 CRACKERS DURING THE U.S. CIVIL WAR

The United States Civil War influenced most Americans, and Crackers were no exception. As they were inhabitants of Florida, they belonged to the Confederate States which seceded before the war even started. Although they maybe did not fully agree with the secession, and they had their own approach to slavery, they influenced the development of the war significantly.

3.1 Cracker's approach to institution of slavery

Whether Florida Cracker culture was pro-slavery or if Crackers were the opponents of this institution is hard to clearly state. Controversial opinions on this topic exist among many sources. However, as it is in vast majority of questions concerning Crackers, the truth is probably somewhere in the middle.

Some sources argue that Crackers were not slaveholders. Delma E. Presley, Georgia Southern University professor, noted that “in the ante-bellum period, “Cracker” was a general designation for non-slaveholding whites of Georgia,” and as many Crackers moved southward from Georgia to Florida during its annexation, this probably applied even to Crackers from Florida. Actually, before the Florida became territory of United States, blacks were running away from slave states and sought refuge here, especially among the Seminole. Irony is that vast majority of them became their slaves, but they were more satisfied to serve to Indians than to moil on plantations.⁶⁷

It is true, that larger owners of slaves were planters. Even Hill and McCall stated that “Negroes were concentrated in the expanding plantation Region,”⁶⁸ and picture of a black slave working hard on cotton plantation is well known. However, this does not mean that Crackers as cattle risers did not own any slaves at all. It is likely that at the beginnings of Cracker Culture most of the Crackers, if not all of them, actually did not own many slaves. But in the course of the time their culture developed, and some Crackers were forced by their growing herds of cattle to acquire slaves. Castelnau noted that Crackers “have a wife, and children, some negroes.”⁶⁹ This indicates that some of the Crackers were slaveholders.

⁶⁷ Delma E. Presley, „The Crackers of Georgia“ *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 60, (1976), 106;.Akerman, Jr., *Florida Cowman*, 73.

⁶⁸ Hill and McCall, „Cracker Culture“, 229.

⁶⁹ Castelnau, *Essay on Middle Florida*, 52.

However the truth is that the relationship of Crackers to their slaves was always quite different from the typical behavior of most southern slaveholders.

Philo Tower, a Northern traveler who wrote a narrative of his visit to the South, stated that “slaves here [in South] in general are more cruelly treated than the dumb brutes are.” But he refers to the South, not to Florida and certainly not to especially to Crackers, although there of course could be exceptions among them. Tower, however, was not the only one of such opinion. For instance Denham focused more on Crackers and argued that they shared a “firm sense of racial superiority over blacks, who they believed were only fit for slavery.” However, even this does not mean neither all Crackers were slaveholders, nor that if they were, they treated slaves badly. And Denham himself admitted that their relationship to slavery is one of the things which still wait for its exploring.⁷⁰

Already mentioned Jake Summerlin belongs to Crackers who actually owned slaves, although he had only a few of them. Despite the fact that they were slaves, in eyes of many Southerners only property, according to Akerman, Summerlin treated them as a family. Two of his slaves were even in the function of cowmen and when it was needed, he and one of his slaves fought together against Seminoles. Akerman furthermore stated that although Jake Summerlin was slave owner “he was never interested in protecting this ‘peculiar institution’.”⁷¹ The truth is that what relation had Crackers to slavery is not accurately known, but as Summerlin was considered King of Crackers, it can be suggested that at least some of Crackers looked up to him and may be even followed his manners.

3.2 Crackers’ role in U.S. Civil War

Crackers influence on U.S. Civil War was not negligible. The question is if Crackers liked the idea of secession. Denham stated that according to travel accounts, Cracker were anti-Confederate, but Ste. Claire added to this argument that it is not sure whether they were pro-Union. The fact is that as they were Floridians, they supported Confederacy, but

⁷⁰ Philo Tower, *Slavery unmasked*, (Rochester, 1856), 189; Denham, “The Florida Cracker,” *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 72, 456; Denham, “The Florida Cracker,” *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 72, 468.

⁷¹ Akerman, Jr. and Akerman, *Jacob Summerlin*, 49.

according to Akerman, Floridians supported Confederacy only because Florida was one of the Confederate states, and Crackers had every thing that mattered there.⁷²

3.2.1 Crackers as soldiers

Crackers have their credit for their participation in Seminole wars as volunteer soldiers, but according to several sources they actually were not good soldiers. Lieutenant Oliver Howard stated that during the Third Seminole War “they drink, gamble, and swear and do all manner of discreditable things, and are not withal very good soldiers.”⁷³ However, in U.S. Civil War they had an extraordinary role, as specific type of soldiers.

Although, as a lot of people from Florida even Crackers probably served as soldiers in U.S. Civil War, only a few accounts of this exist. What is mostly mentioned is their participation in Cow Cavalry. According to Akerman the Cow Cavalry was created in order to “protect the cattle drivers and to provide some protection to the settlers of Florida,” which indicates that cattle traders during the Civil War were usually facing obstacles on their trails, mainly in form of Federal units trying to steal the cattle. The Cow Cavalry also known as Cattle Guard, Co. B. 1st Battalion or Fla. Special Cavalry was created in 1864 by Captain McKay who was one of the cattle traders, although the leader of the Cow Cavalry became Colonel Charles I. Munnerlyn.⁷⁴

Probably the largest conflict Cow Cavalry ever get into was the one in 1865 which took place in Fort Myers. This particular unit was lead by Major William Footman and Jake Summerlin participated as a scout. Although it is considered as one of the largest conflicts of Cow Cavalry, Akerman argued that it was not so serious. Despite the fact that several hundreds of troops participated, there was no more than ten casualties both in side of Union and the Cow Cavalry. Unfortunately, this attack was unsuccessful, and Major Footman was forced to withdraw his men.⁷⁵

Crackers, of course, were not the only participants in Cow Cavalry, the others were for instance veterans, ranchers, and settlers, but all of them were called cowboy soldiers. Why this Special Cavalry, which lasted only about one year, played so significant, and

⁷² Denham, “The Florida Cracker,” *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 72, 468; Ste. Claire, *Cracker*, 52; Akerman, Jr. and Akerman, *Jacob Summerlin*, 49.

⁷³ Ste. Claire, *Cracker*, 50.

⁷⁴ Akerman, *Florida Cowman*, 91-93.

⁷⁵ Akerman, Jr. and Akerman, *Jacob Summerlin*, 61.

unfortunately often underestimated role in U.S. Civil War will be covered in the next chapter.

3.2.2 Supply of Confederate army

As the U.S. Civil War continued, Confederate army run out of food supplies, because the cattle of other Southern states like Georgia or Alabama was already consumed. Florida, as mentioned above, had before the Civil War one of the largest amount of livestock of the South states. Actually, Florida was in second position, right behind Texas. Confederate Army apparently saw the potential of this and since 1863 required support from Florida in form of beef supply. Southern historian Merlin Coulter noted that “the armies turned to Florida as the best source [of beef] still remaining.”⁷⁶

Akerman noted that the Confederate government firstly redeemed the herds of northern Florida. It was easier and much faster to deliver it into the places where it was needed. But of course, with the course of the time even this area of Florida run out of beef, and Confederate government had to start trading with Central and South Florida, as there were still large amounts of livestock.⁷⁷

Crackers, as famous cattle risers, were probably the main source of beefes for Confederate army. One of the best examples will be probably one of the largest beef suppliers of Confederate army, who was already mentioned King of the Crackers, Jacob Summerlin. It was probably because the size of his numerous herd. Important role played also production of calves which was annually from five thousands to eight thousands heads.⁷⁸ Next reason was probably his years of experience of cattle trade to Cuba, making the acquaintance with Captain James McKay, who was skilled cattle trader, too.

Summerlin agreed to two year contract according to which he was supposed to supply Confederate army with 600 heads of cattle per week, receiving from 8 to 10 dollars per head, which would made him very rich taking into consideration that he supplied the Confederate army with around twenty-five thousands head of cattle overall. But according to his own words “I was not given a copper,” it was probably good deed from him and

⁷⁶ Akerman, *Florida Cowman*, 83.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁷⁸ Akerman, Jr. and Akerman, *Jacob Summerlin*, 51.

evidence that although he did not persisted on slavery, he supported Florida as a part of Confederacy.⁷⁹

Despite the fact, some sources accused Summerlin for being Unionist. According to William Russel, Summerlin even admitted this in his request for the pardon after the war when he stated that he “never fired a shot at a U.S. citizen,” which was according to him reference to Unionists.⁸⁰ However, this probably just supports the fact that Summerlin was not interested in war, and he devoted himself to cattle trading, although Akerman noted that Summerlins supply of Confederate army was not the only prove of supporting confederacy. He stated that “he also furnished a company of cowboy-soldiers he raised with ammunition and arms.”⁸¹

After two years of supplying Confederate army, when the contract Summerlin made with Confederacy expired, he was replaced by his collaborator Captain McKay. He gathered several cattle drovers and continued in supplying the Confederate army. Overall he delivered 500 000 heads of cattle. Even though Summerlin stopped supplying confederacy, he continued in his partnership with McKay, and together they were trying to smuggle cattle to Cuba. These actions were very hazardous due to the Union blockade, but Summerling along with McKay were mostly successful. This trading was more beneficial for both of them than supplying Confederate army, because Spanish gold, which they were paid, had a greater value than U.S. dollars, so they get more money per head and along with this their earnings were growing.⁸²

It did not take long, and also Union became interested in Florida resources of beeves, what worsen the situation in the South. Union soldiers were sent to Florida usually to steal cattle, and Confederate deserters along with Union sympathizers were helping them. Those two units got very often into a fight with cattle drovers and settlers of Florida. This caused that the supplies were endangered and started to be volatile. Sometimes the Confederacy did not get its supply for weeks, what of course was a big problem for the army, which was already getting weak.⁸³

⁷⁹ Akerman, Jr. and Akerman, *Jacob Summerlin*, 51.

⁸⁰ William Russell, „Cracker“ The Story of Florida’s Confederate Cow Cavalry, *History of the Civil War Florida Ancestors Online*, accessed March 20, 2014. /cowcav <http://archive.is/THWAD>

⁸¹ Akerman, Jr. and Akerman, *Jacob Summerlin*, 51-52.

⁸² Akerman, *Florida Cowboy*, 87; Akerman, Jr. and Akerman, *Jacob Summerlin*, 56.

⁸³ Akerman, Jr. and Akerman, *Jacob Summerlin*, 56 – 57; Akerman, *Florida Cowboy*, 89.

In such times it was needed to come up with some solution for this particular problem. McKay, as one of the main cattle drover probably also experienced some attacks by Unionists. It is no surprise than, that he came up with the idea of the Cow Cavalry, a special military unit, which would facilitate the transfers of cattle to Tennessee and Charleston, where Florida sent the beeves the most often. It was not only one unit, but it was companion of nine companies. As discussed above, the Cow Cavalry consisted of ordinary people, like old veterans or quite the opposite of kids, but the purpose was clear. It was supposed to secure the supplies of beef to Confederate army, to ensure the safety of cattle owners from Union thieves, and also to protect the settlers of Florida. It is for sure that this Special Cavalry fulfilled the expectation, because Akerman states that “the Cattle drivers coordinated by McKay continued until the last days of the War,” and in the last months of the war it was still important to supply the Confederacy. However, even this could not prevent the cattle owners from selling their livestock to Union, as it was their voluntary decision.⁸⁴

3.3 Crackers at the end of the U.S. Civil War

Although it could be thought that the herds of livestock were consumed like those of other southern states, it is not so. There remained many herds in Florida. Even at the end of the U.S. Civil war, livestock rising and cattle trade in the deep South remained major part of its culture, especially culture of Crackers.

At the end of the war, Florida, as well as other southern states were devastated, and it needed some business through which it would recover. Cattle industry was one great opportunity. The trade with West Indies dropped to the lowest numbers during the U.S. Civil War due to the Union blockade. According to Akerman, even Summerlin, one of the best cattle drovers, “shipped only a thousand or so cows this way,” during the war.⁸⁵ But now, after the war ended, it was the right time to restore this trade, and if possible to establish as well as new ones, as it represented one of the best options how to help United States in recovery.

⁸⁴ Akerman, Jr. and Akerman, *Jacob Summerlin*, 60; Akerman, *Florida Cowboy*, 95-98.

⁸⁵ Akerman, Jr. and Akerman, *Jacob Summerlin*, 45.

4 CRACKERS IN POSTBELLUM PERIOD

4.1 Cracker Culture after the U.S. Civil War

Cracker culture significantly developed since its beginnings to the times after the Civil War. No doubt that even the early Crackers participated in creating history of the Florida, but actually their influence strengthened during and after the U.S. Civil War. Crackers finally found the right place for them which perfectly fitted not only to their nature but also to Florida environment.

4.1.1 Cracker's style of living after the U.S. Civil War

The culture of Crackers during the years of Civil War and after it is closely related to cattle raising. This way of living and making money perfectly dovetailed with their customs and traditions. The early Crackers were not dependent on making money, but maybe because they did not know how to combine it with their love of leisure. However, they figured this out little bit later.

Cattle raising, as mentioned above, did not require too much toil, as the animals were able to take care of themselves. Of course it was not completely effortless, but still it was comfortable for vast majority of Crackers. However, the cattle will not make money only by grazing itself. Crackers quickly understood the opportunity of Cattle trade, although they knew that this will include hard work. The note of Samuel Fairbanks that “the Florida cracker is ... a quiet, good citizen who develops the country to some purpose by honest toil,”⁸⁶ indicates that Crackers understood that after the Civil War the Cattle trade is great opportunity to help recovering Florida.

However, it is probable that it would not only make them money, but it would satisfy their congenital needs, too. It was needed to drive the cattle usually to long distances to markets and these journeys were definitely not comfortable and safe, but they probably fitted to Cracker's love of migration. Furthermore, as one of the most important trades was the one with Cuba, a lot of Crackers – cattle raisers, moved after the Civil War to

⁸⁶ Ste. Claire, *Cracker*, 50.

Southwestern Florida, as Tampa was one of the key points of cattle trade with Cuba and simply “central and southwestern Florida cattle was king.”⁸⁷

In connection to this, also Cracker’s living conditions have improved. Their old habits altogether with the difficult living conditions they were used to allowed them to at least partially enjoy this hard work of a cattle drover. It can be supposed that the great results altogether with money made participated in the changing of most parts of they everyday life, besides others for instance in housing, education or eating habits. As an exemplary case could be considered well-known Jacob Summerlin, who, after the Civil War, “donated land to churches and for the creation of a school.” Of course that this was not case of every Cracker, as Jacob was considered one of the wealthiest ones. However, vast majority of Crackers were better off, simply because of the fact that finally “Crackers found success in the cattle industry.”⁸⁸

4.2 Crackers role in Reconstruction

When the U.S. Civil War ended, Florida found itself in postwar economic depression. Resources, in most cases, were exhausted. Freed slaves needed to find their place, and Florida needed to recover. Several ways how to ensure this existed. One of them was lumber industry, which became after the Civil War very lucrative business, and actually employed even blacks. The lumber was traded not only within America, but also to Europe, and not small amounts of money were paid for Florida lumber. One of the most successful lumbermen F. H. Herington earned about \$23, 000 during five months.⁸⁹

Another business that became popular was fishing industry, but what probably more lured blacks was farming. They found themselves interested in growing wide range of crops. Especially growing of citrus was one of the most widely used, and citrus industry became prosperous business not only for blacks, but also for instance for Northerners or

⁸⁷ Gregory Jason Bell, “Socioeconomic Developments in the Tampa Bay Area During Reconstruction” *From Theory to Practice 2012*, (2012), 206.

⁸⁸ Akerman, Jr. and Akerman, *Jacob Summerlin*, 122; Bell, “Socioeconomic Developments in the Tampa Bay Area During Reconstruction” *From Theory to Practice 2012*, 208.

⁸⁹ Bell, “Socioeconomic Developments in the Tampa Bay Area During Reconstruction” *From Theory to Practice 2012*, 200.

Midwesterners.⁹⁰ However, these were not the only ones remunerative businesses. Especially for Crackers, the cattle trade, namely with Cuba, became favorable.

4.2.1 Cattle trade with Cuba

Trading of cattle from Florida to Cuba was popular already before the Civil War. Specifically it has run since 1856. Although as mentioned above, during the war this trade experienced a decline, partly because of the need to supply the army and partly because of the Union blockade. Even though the cattle trade with Cuba in this period “dropped to a trickle,”⁹¹ at the end it was restored.

One of the reasons why it was remunerative to trade especially with Cuba was probably the fact that Cubans still paid in Spanish gold. Crackers saw the potential in it and actually, the Spanish gold gained a moniker “cattlemen’s currency”. Florida’s Reconstruction government, also saw the potential and “began to impose sizeable assessments on them,” as it was remunerative for them from the taxation point of view. To be specific, according to census in 1867 in entire Florida there was 463,000 heads of cattle, with total value slightly higher than \$3,000,000. To compare this with situation twenty years later, in 1887 there was approximately 653,000 heads of cattle, but their total value almost doubled.⁹²

Jacob Summerlin was still one of the largest cattle traders, and actually according to G. F. Thompson, inspector of the Freedman’s Bureau of Refugees and Abandoned Lands, Summerlin was even the largest one. Actually, according to Akerman, Jr., after the war Summerlin’s herd counted almost the same number of heads as in the beginning of it.⁹³ He banded together with his old friend McKay again, and shipping to Cuba could start.

When Summerlin renewed the cooperation with McKay, he needed to gather experienced cattle drovers, who were in his eyes Crackers, people of his kind. They also liked to cooperate with him, as he was considered their King, and he treated them and payed them well. He employed “every man within 50 miles of the port of Tampa in 1865” and in 1866 the first boat with cattle since the end of Civil war sailed from Florida to Cuba.

⁹⁰ Bell, “Socioeconomic Developments in the Tampa Bay Area During Reconstruction” *From Theory to Practice 2012*, 204.

⁹¹ Akerman, Jr. and Akerman, *Jacob Summerlin*, 69.

⁹² Akerman, Jr., *Florida Cowman*, 116; Akerman, Jr. and Akerman, *Jacob Summerlin*, 67; Akerman, Jr., *Florida Cowman*, 105.

⁹³ Akerman, Jr. and Akerman, *Jacob Summerlin*, 66, 51.

McKay and Summerlin were successful together, which indicates also the fact that in 1867 they shipped 7,089 heads of cattle to Cuba.⁹⁴

In the 1868, however, another decline in cattle trade with Cuba appeared and the earnings from it fell significantly. It was probably caused by revolution in Cuba, which did not want to be dependent on Spain anymore, and which lasted for ten years. With this is connected imposing of import fee which was seven dollars per head and it caused that in 1868 and in the following year the number of shipped cattle dropped to 3,000 a year. However, when the military in Cuba found itself in unpleasant situation, which was nothing different than lack of meat, this fee was quickly canceled, and the trade with Florida could continue in even much higher numbers than before the decline.⁹⁵

Following ten years were for Summerlin and in general for cattlemen very profitable. Cuba due to the revolutionary war demanded constant supplies of beeves, which was great opportunity not only for them, but also for recovering Florida. Summerlin, of course, did everything to adapt to this situation, and he continued in hiring even more cattle drivers, called cracker cowboys, to hunt and buy the cattle.

One of the most known Cracker cowboys was Morgan Bonaparte Mizell, simply called Bone. Some sources refer to him as to “Crown Prince of all Cowmen...but never a King,” probably because he did not even want to be. However, he was one of the best cattle drovers in his times. Many stories about him exist. He was for instance well known for branding his cattle with his own teeth, or for his “wild spending sprees and spur-of-the-moment generosity.” His philosophy of life was that “them that’s got, has got to lose. Them that hasn’t, kaint.”⁹⁶

Nevertheless, from 1870 to 1880 were to Cuba shipped more than 165,000 heads of cattle. According to Akerman, this allowed to some Florida cities, like Tampa or Fort Meyers, one of the most important cities of cattle trade, to grow. For two next years, cattle trade with Cuba was still successful and even continued to expand.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Akerman, Jr. and Akerman, *Jacob Summerlin*, 66-67, 69.

⁹⁵ Akerman, Jr. and Akerman, *Jacob Summerlin*, 96; Bell, “Socioeconomic Developments in the Tampa Bay Area During Reconstruction” *From Theory to Practice 2012*, 206.

⁹⁶ Ste. Claire, *Cracker*, 181.

⁹⁷ Akerman, Jr. and Akerman, *Jacob Summerlin*, 97.

4.2.2 Decline and changes in cattle trade

Everything had changed when in 1883 Spanish authorities imposed another fee on imported cattle and probably because of this the “Cuban cattle market dried up” again. Although it did not cease completely, as trading with Cuba continued though in lower numbers. Akerman also stated that “the Cuban market was fairly dependable until after World War I.” In 1883 also Summerlin sold vast majority of his cattle and land to his sons, and devoted himself to other activities, however after some time he began to miss the old way of life, and “purchased some real estate parcels and a one-half interest in a large herd of cattle.”⁹⁸ This shows how deeply rooted was this lifestyle in Crackers’ nature.

Nevertheless, with the arrival of new century, the cattle trade so typical for Florida changed even more. Floridian cattle trade with Cuba was endangered by competitors from Texas and Central America. This caused that prices declined and in connection to this, according to Akerman, “by 1905 the demand for Florida beef in Cuba had begun to drop.”⁹⁹

The beginning of World War I made this situation even worse. Of course that Cracker Cowboys did not rest idle. They took advantage of the spreading railroads, which “became the key to most commercial expansion,” and started to trade within the United States.¹⁰⁰ The usage of rail lines to transfer the cattle started to overshadow the traditional Cracker way of driving cattle. However, the rail lines were not the only thing that changed the essence of Cracker cattle trade. Later in the twentieth century, new restrictions came, for instance orders to build fences, and the Crackers’ style of living slowly started to fade away.

⁹⁸ Akerman, Jr. and Akerman, *Jacob Summerlin*, 97-98, 108; 99; 108.

⁹⁹ Akerman, Jr., *Florida Cowman*, 119.

¹⁰⁰ Akerman, Jr. and Akerman, *Jacob Summerlin*, 108.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this thesis was to explore where Crackers came from and how they developed up until the start of the twentieth century. It also identified the impact Crackers actually had on Florida, and what role they played in the state's history. This thesis recognized different opinions of where Crackers came from, ultimately favoring Grady McWhiney's theory that Crackers are of Celtic origin.

This thesis dealt with the culture of antebellum Crackers, and tried to register the shift this culture made during the Civil War and post-war period. Furthermore, many opinions of northern travelers were introduced to show how the vast majority of non-cracker people actually viewed them and their culture, and how they ignored their traditional ways and habits they brought from their old home.

The impact of Crackers, especially their herding practices in Florida and their role in to the United States Civil War should not be forgotten. Their supplies of beef to the Confederate army and their trade with Cuba in the period of Reconstruction shaped U.S and Florida history. Despite the fact that with the arrival of the new century the Cracker culture started to fade, it has never fade away completely. Clark I. Cross, a historian from Florida, got it right when in 1975 he said that "there is an Old Florida, call it Cracker Florida if you will, where a distinctive way of life and attitudes persist, where houses and barns seem little changed but this Florida exists only in pockets and seems harder to find every passing year."¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Ste. Claire, *Cracker*, 118.

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